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Cookbooks, Politics, and Culture

Ilan Zvi Baron

Introduction

To think critically and politically about food involves an exploration of the cultural politics of power and appropriation, of how meaning is constructed and identities constituted. For example, to discover that a food you identify as your own but is also someone else's can be a humbling experience. The famous Canadian Jewish author, Mordecai Richler, recalls precisely such a moment when he discovered as a young teenager that the potato pancake (latkes), a traditional Jewish food served during Hanukah, is also German. That he discovered this in the 1940s, during the Second World War, exacerbated the shock. Reflecting upon his reading of *All Quiet on Western Front* and the activity some German soldiers were carrying out: "The business, I realized, alarmed - no, affronted - was the making of potato latkes, a favorite of mine ... a dish I had always taken to be Jewish, certainly not a German concoction..." (Richler 1986). For Richler, this act of reading and thinking about food transported him into an international conflict, and forced him to reflect not only on how he understood his Jewish and Zionist identity, but also that of the Germans.

In this chapter, I explore how the art and technology of food functions in IR as practices of the every-day by unpacking the diaspora-home country relations that situate *Jerusalem*, a cookbook jointly authored by an Israeli Jew (Yotam Ottolenghi) and a Palestinian-Israeli (Sami Tamimi) (Ottolenghi and Tamimi 2012). Cookbooks offer

multiple avenues for enquiry, all guided by the constitutive elements provided by food in shaping the constructions of our senses of individual and collective identities. Food can provide an entry into political critique, and cookbooks provide one resource in which to pursue such a critique.

Food and Cookbooks as a Resource

We can treat food in the same way that Mónica Trujillo-López approaches art, as having immense cultural and political meaning in the political spaces that elite statist discourses of IR theory have traditionally ignored. Food is art, technology, and politics. Food is an art because cooking is a creative endeavor; a technology because the tools involved in cooking, serving, and storing food speak to various conditions for how we produce and understand the world of our making; and politics because of its close association with identity (Bell and Valentine 1997; Gvion 2012; Narayan 1995; Raviv 2003). In addition, the ways in which we control our food intake and of what foods we decide to eat can be understood to function, to borrow language from Michel Foucault (2007), as a technology of the self. The same can be said when we do not have a choice of what to eat due to socio-economic conditions. Here, the absence of choices reflects the social identity of poverty.

Food travels. Just as a border is more of an illusion about the separation between inside and outside, foods travel across regions, continents and oceans. There are, nevertheless, national narratives surrounding food. In France and Italy, for example, culinary traditions are closely bound up with national identity. However, to speak as if

there is only one style of cooking that reflects these countries' culinary traditions would be mistaken. There is no single French or Italian style, there are regional styles, just like in China there is a range of regional cooking styles that belies the idea of a homogenous Chinese food. The food studies scholar Sydney Mintz (1996) argues that it makes little methodological sense to refer to national cuisines because food cultures do not respect the boundaries of the state and are usually regional as opposed to national.

Nevertheless, there is a strong identity component to food, and that is apparent in the material culture of food. There is a case to be made for speaking in terms of national cuisines. First, people do and, second, there is a significant political aspect to referring to food in national terms. Cookbooks are a form of material culture, performing the function of guiding how to engage with different foods, use different ingredients, cook in different styles, and understand different food cultures or foodways. Cookbooks are tools that also reflect multiple aspects of the condition in which they are published. In a post-modern condition (Jameson 1991), they can be viewed as a source that offers people meaning, often through entertainment produced in glossy photographs or anthropological and historical journeys in search of authenticity.¹

Cookbooks can have explicit political characteristics, and as Arjun Appadurai (1988) argues, cookbooks play a role in the construction of national identity. In this sense, it is hard to argue that cookbooks are not relevant for IR. For all of the reasons above, cookbooks are important primary sources, as is recognized in the discipline of History (Pilcher 2006; Pilcher 2012). They can be primary material for IR scholars as well.

Cookbooks featuring a country's or a region's cuisine provide the boundaries of an identity by including and excluding certain recipes.² An Italian cookbook without olive oil would be odd, just like an Italian cookbook with a recipe for sushi would be bizarre. Indeed, the methodological difficulties of defining a cuisine as national, either in regard to a state or a national people, have not stopped scholars and cookbook authors from writing about food in national terms.³ Following their work, and Appadurai's (1988) argument about how national cookbooks function as a part of nation-state building, there is a case to be made that speaking about a national cuisine is not so much a description as it is a reflection of how food functions politically in identity-construction. We hold assumptions about the types of foods that we associate with specific identity groups. A cookbook can challenge and reaffirm these beliefs.

The International Cultural Politics of *Jerusalem*

In this section, I discuss the identities of "Jewish" and "Israeli" as mediated in a cookbook, Ottolenghi and Tamimi's *Jerusalem*. Some background is in order. Jewish food predates Israeli food, of course, because there were Jewish communities prior to the establishment of a modern Israel. Those communities jointly produced what could be called Jewish food, the result of multiple influences, from the dietary laws to local regional cuisines. Jews in the diaspora have adopted and transformed local foods, thereby making the boundaries of Jewish cooking fluid. Nevertheless, it is still possible to talk and write about Jewish food.⁴

The boundaries of what marks Israeli food are similarly fluid. The range of ingredients, cooking styles and tastes that are found in Israeli cooking are as diverse as its population, which comes from all over the world. Nevertheless, it is possible to talk in a meaningful way about Israeli food.

The development of Israeli food, or of styles of cooking that could be described as Israeli cuisine, reflects the practices of what is consumed in Israel, the politics of Zionism, and the relations between Jews in the diaspora and Israelis, most but not all of whom are Jews. Politically, being able to claim foods as Israeli served (and serves) the larger political process of legitimating Zionism if not the Jewish state. For diaspora Jewry, Israeli food was largely defined by falafel and hummus, traditional Arab foods (Gvion 2012). A common postcard image in Israel is of a pita bread stuffed with falafel and topped with an Israeli flag. The local cactus fruit, the “sabra”, which is indigenous to Mexico, is a case in point, as the name of the fruit has come to serve as a metaphor for native-born Israelis, prickly on the outside but sweet on the inside.

Israeli cookbooks published in English certainly exist and have existed, although it used to be the case that, other than the occasional tourist book about Israeli food, any reputable Israeli cookbook would be in Hebrew and inaccessible to most of diaspora Jewry. One of the more general points that helps make the case for the political nature of Israeli food is that the adoption of local foods by Israelis is a way for them feel as though they belong in the region. Correspondingly, for diaspora Jews to adopt Israeli foods like falafel and hummus is to make diaspora Jews feel more connected to Israel.

Appropriation has become a key methodological concept in studies of food culture and politics, and refers to the practice of one group claiming something from another people

as their own. Hummus has become a major Israeli food, one that can be understood as representing a significant appropriation of Palestinian and Arab food culture and potentially a classic case of a form of cultural appropriation or cultural theft whereby “Jewish appropriation of certain Arab dishes can be regarded as yet another instance of Israel swallowing Palestinian resources and claiming them as their own” (Hirsch 2011: 618).

The *Jerusalem* cookbook, however, tries to tell a different story. In recent years English-language cookbooks about Israeli food have appeared, and, significantly, not as translations. One of the more recent is Michael Solomonov’s *Zahav* (Solomonov and Cook 2015), which in an addition to a cookbook is also heavily auto-ethnographic. Israeli cookbooks are gaining widespread recognition and some are best-sellers, the most famous of which is probably *Jerusalem*, although the *Honey & Co* cookbook (Srulovich and Packer 2014)⁵ has also won multiple awards. Ottolenghi, one of the authors of *Jerusalem*, has spoken at length about the cultural politics of their cookbook (Ottolenghi 2014).

In this regard, *Jerusalem* was self-consciously written to overcome the political and cultural violence of the Arab-Israeli conflict and to seek a unifying narrative through food.⁶ The authors sought to explore the local foods of the city not as a practical lesson in appropriation but as a voyage of discovery and sharing. The cookbook is not a case of food or culinary diplomacy,⁷ but an attempt to devise a narrative through food where the meaning of food is not stolen but shared and respected.

Their cookbook is explicitly political in multiple ways. The very title of the cookbook, *Jerusalem*, is to invoke one of the most hotly contested pieces of land in

human history, a city of eminent importance to the three monotheistic faiths, the capital of Israel that is not internationally recognized, a city marked by war, politics and religion at every corner. The authors state that their purpose is to find a common ground for Jerusalemites to share in the hope of overcoming the ongoing conflict in the city and the region.

However, published in English and not in either Hebrew or Arabic, the book's intended audience is obviously outside Israel. To understand the politics and cultural success⁸ of this cookbook is to look internationally, not in Israel, and to appreciate that the success of their cookbook could only have happened outside of Israel. The book presents an inherent contradiction: that the Jerusalem it creates is largely possible only outside of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, for Jews at least, the book provides a safe way to feel connected to the region as the most controversial aspects of the book are most likely not about the selection of recipes but their complexity.⁹

In this vein, there is another side to the politics of this cookbook, one in which questions about authenticity, identity, legitimacy, and appropriation are all present. To understand how these questions are present is to discover how food is one of the most common ways in which people experience international relations. The book's pursuit of authenticity through food is explicitly acknowledged by the authors, who wanted to write a cookbook that could function as a political *cris-de-coeur* using food to bring people together. This discourse of authenticity is possible since the authors both grew up in Jerusalem and one is Jewish-Israeli while the other is Palestinian, facts that provide the foundation for an authentic voice. First, being from Jerusalem allows them to claim authentic knowledge and thus have authority about the local food. Second, because they

come from “opposing” sides but are, nevertheless, highly successful business partners,¹⁰ they provide a model for overcoming the conflict.

The authenticity of *Jerusalem* is a key feature in the book’s authority and appeal. To engage with the cookbook is to participate in an idealized vision of the Middle East where Jews and Arabs live alongside each other as equals and share their foods with respect. This vision is in so many ways the opposite of the political situation in Jerusalem where attempts to help unify the city can backfire.¹¹ However, it is a vision that comes off as authoritative precisely because of who the authors are. The cookbook, in other words, produces a locality that consumers can experience at home.

The production of locality is not an apolitical enterprise and is methodologically complex (Appadurai 1995). The fact that the book self-consciously seeks to create an ideal of Jerusalem is an act of political imagination. They produce a locality of Jerusalem for many people to buy into, and their story works, or said differently, the locality that they produce is believable, because the food is real, and we can trust that the food is real because of the author’s authority. Furthermore, the consumption of this book enables a connection with both Jewish and non-Jewish Arab cultures, offering consumers the sense that they are contributing in some way to efforts at peacebuilding.

In their production of locality, the authors create a place to visit that enables escaping from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, if not overcoming it, while still feeling connected to Israel. As such, the book offers an opportunity to explore the Jerusalem or Middle East of our dreams, one in which the conflict is finally resolved. In these ways, we can see how food becomes an embodiment of values and beliefs pertinent to a vision of an idealized Middle East.

Conclusion

In Allison Howell's contribution to this volume, she notes how science, technology and art are "never politically neutral" (page) {Delete references to page numbers throughout} The ontological character of medicine – which is the focus in her chapter – and food to the human condition is similar in that they both address biological survival but are also political. Food is not just biological fuel, it has social, cultural, political and historical meanings. Food is an identifier of who we are. This combination of biological necessity and human constructed meaning makes food a powerful marker of identity. This power is both unifying and divisive but in Israel the unifying power of food risks being overwhelmed by a pattern of appropriation. Appropriation is a form of cultural violence, and is something that Israel, like most nation states, has been very good at. The international and transnational dimensions of Israeli food, as produced through English-language Israeli cookbooks, speak to something greater than the local practices of Israelis taking Palestinian or Arab food as their own. Rather, they speak to how, as diaspora Jews, when we (I am writing here reflexively) partake in enjoying Israeli food we are also involved in the politics of the region: to cook foods with Israeli associations is to sustain a connection to Israel.

In this sense, to research the cultural politics of food is to participate in a wider methodological debate about the relationships between the subject of study, the experiences of the subject, and the role of the researcher. In IR, when writing about global politics from a high level of social aggregation (Lebow 2008) it is much easier to

avoid these types of methodological and ethical problems.¹² Writing from a high level of social aggregation makes it possible to ignore people and to think in terms of structures or in broad generalizations about human values.¹³ It is all too easy to forget to think about how people experience international relations.¹⁴

Speaking reflexively, for many in the Jewish diaspora one way to connect with Israel is through food. The diaspora's relationship with Israel is complicated and often controversial (Baron 2015; Kahn-Harris 2014; Rosner and Herzog 2015). The *Jerusalem* cookbook provides one avenue in which to explore how questions about appropriation and thus power relations, claims to identity, the production of locality, and the ways in which it makes sense to think in terms of a national cuisine are all relevant to international relations scholarship. They are also all relevant to diaspora/Israel relations. To write about a cookbook may seem to be low on the ladder of significant primary resources when compared to, for example, diplomatic letters. Yet, it could be argued that the opposite is the case. International relations may have started as an academic discipline centered on the practices of political elites, but the experiences of international relations are much greater than what one diplomat said to the other diplomat. The cultural politics of food, and the way in which food represents if not embodies life in international relations, make it a serious topic for study and one that clearly represents the broadening – and challenging – of the field represented by STAIR.

Notes

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¹ See, for example, Grace Young (2004).

² On the question of boundaries see, Abbott (1995).

³ See, Bell and Valentine (1997), Gvion (2012), Naryan (1995), and Raviv (1995).

Insofar as cookbooks are concerned, we have all seen national cookbooks that reflect the cooking of a particular country. These are cookbooks where a particular cooking style is reflected, and which is framed as belonging to a particular country (ie, France, Italy, Austria, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, etc.). Occasionally, they are framed in reference to a national institution, such as Peyton (2009).

⁴ On Jewish food see: Chandler (2014), Deutsch and Sacks (2009), Roden (1997), Tuchman and Levine (1993), Friedlander (1986).

⁵ They have also released a specifically baking cookbook (Srulovich and Packer 2015).

⁶ There are, of course, Palestinian cookbooks that seeks to highlight the Palestinian identity of food. See, for example, El-Haddad and Schmitt (2013).

⁷ See, for example, the program <https://www.nyu.edu/global/global-academic-centers/washington-dc/nyu-washington--dc-events/culinary-diplomacy--make-food--not-war.html> (accessed September 5, 2015); see also volume 11 of the journal *Public Diplomacy* (2014) <http://publicdiplomacymagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/GASTRODIPLOMACY-PDF.pdf>

⁸ See, for example, Julia Moskin's (2013) report in the *New York Times*.

⁹ The books' popularity does not appear to have the same reception among the Palestinian diaspora, although this does not mean they are not buying it. This conclusion is based on a preliminary but not systematic analysis of the cookbook's reception in the news media, including such publications as, *the Globe and Mail*, *HaAretz*, *the New York Times*, *Tablet*, *the Forward*, *the Times of Israel*, *the Guardian*, *al Arabiya News*, *Mondoweis* and *bon appetit*.

¹⁰ Their business is in London.

¹¹ The Jerusalem Light Rail passes through Jewish and Arab neighbourhood, and was hoped to help unite the city. However, the Light Rail has been the target of Arab attacks making even this attempt at unifying the city impossible to separate from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the politics of the Jerusalem Light Rail see, Nolte and Yacobi (2015).

¹² Which is not to say that IR scholars have not raised them particularly in regard to ethics. See for example, the classic works by Mervyn Frost (1986; 1996).

¹³ Compare such classic works as, Kenneth Neal Waltz (1979), Morgenthau (2006), Wendt (1999), Lebow (2008).

¹⁴ Feminist scholarship in IR has been very important in regard to this challenge. See the classic work by Cynthia Enloe (2000).